

Imagine a Christian Like This

James 1: 16-17

What would happen if all of a sudden the people of Dayton started treating other people like this:

"Yes it is one of our most expensive designs, but it just doesn't do you justice. Have you tried our regular dress department?"

"Hello? Mrs. Jones, this is the washer repairman, my truck broke down and I didn't want you waiting around all day."

"Say...where's the nearest trash basket? I've been carrying my empty lunch sack for 3 blocks."

"Hey, mister, you forget to close the lock on your bike chain."

"Wow, whoever your other hairdresser was, he sure gave you a great cut."

We are standing at the beginning of a New Year, I would like for us to use our imaginations over the next two weeks to imagine what a perfect Christian might be like – and what a perfect church might be like.

The reading this morning spoke of what an ideal Christian would be like. An ideal Christian is a "kind of first fruits of all creation...;" a model of what it means to be a true son or daughter of God.

We are all called to be first fruits of creation and yet, more times than not we come off more like sour lemons than luscious strawberries.

<I>

Christian Ears

What would we be like if we had Christian Ears? A Christian is quick to **listen**. A Christian is eager to REALLY hear. A Christian prays "Lord you waited for me until I was open to you. I will wait patiently for your word."

A Christian listens for the Word of God. A Christian listens for the sounds of the Spirit; a Christian listens to the deep yearnings and hopes of those around him or her.

A Christian understands that there are always two conversations taking place. There is the verbal conversation where words are spoken. And there is the conversation where the heart reaches out with longings that cannot be expressed in words.

A Christian is **obedient** to hear on both levels. I say **obedient** because obedience literally means "a thorough listening." *Ob Audire* means to listen thoroughly or as the Jewish tradition says, "To bare your ear."

It is important to listen obediently to God and to each other or we will probably end up finding ourselves in some meaningless absurd situation.

Absurdus means the exact opposite of *Ob Audire*. *Absurdus* means absolutely deaf. When we say "That's absurd," what we are really saying is that "I'm absolutely deaf to what you are telling me."

When we take the time and the energy to really listen to what is happening around us, we are listening **obediently**.

In the play *The Rainmaker*, Lizzie tells a friend about her father: "Some nights I'm in the kitchen washing the dishes, and pop's playing poker with the boys. I watch him real close and at first I see just an ordinary middle-aged man not very interesting to look at. And then, minute by minute, I see little things, things I've never seen in him before. Good things, bad things, queer little habits I've never noticed. And suddenly I know who he is, and I love him so much I could cry!"

It's difficult for us to see other people for real; we tend to react to their faults instead of responding to

their needs. When we focus on someone's faults, we're not really seeing them as they are.

We are more than our faults. We need to be more like Jesus and look at people the way he saw them: the selfless love that Mary Magdalene possessed; the desire of Levi, the tax collector to serve people; the search for truth that was in Nicodemus; the need for friendship that was in Zaccheus; the good heartedness of Peter.

<II>

Christian Lips

I was in the middle of a sermon one morning at First Congregational Church in St. Clair, Michigan when a first time visitor called out loud "Praise the Lord!"

I wasn't use to such emotions; I maintained my composure and continued. I was well into my second point when once again our visitor called out "Praise the Lord!"

It was then that I lost my concentration. Seeing that I was a little frustrated an usher made his way down the aisle to where our visitor was seated and declared in a voice loud enough for all to hear: "Miss in this church we do not "Praise the Lord!"

It seems that all too often in our Christian Communities there is an aversion to spontaneous words of encouragement during worship. Christians are quick at throwing bricks, but seldom offer bouquets.

Supposedly we are the "Easter People" – we are filled with "new life". If that be true, why then are we so negative; why is it that we complain all the time.

It makes no sense. Someone once said that in every church there always seem to be two groups of people. There is the "Isn't it terrible group," who always finds something to pick apart. And then there is the "what can I do to help group," who has the gift of encouragement and offers their services were needed.

There are times when Christians need to speak hard words to one another. But all of us have been given

the gifts of adoration and affirmation. We need to exercise those gifts with one another and build each other up on a regular basis.

Of all the communities in the world, the church should be the one place where the predominate tone is one of praise.

<III>

Christian Arms

My ideal Christian is not only a good listener, a faithful believer in people, but also a good touchier.

In his book, **The Joy of Being Human** Father Eugene Kenny asserts that "faith wears out when it is preached by people who speak about God being near, while they stay a safe distance from people."

We need more reaching out to people in our church, more touching.

Go through the Gospel and count the number of times that Jesus touched people. The scriptures are filled with such incidents. "Jesus was the human way God chose to get close to us, to pull us aside put his arms around us."

Hugging does not come naturally to me.

I've been in churches where hugging is a ritual. It starts before church in the parking lot, it continues at the door before church, it's done in fellowship time after church, and it's the last thing one does in the parking lot before going home. That kind of ritualistic hugging is offensive to me.

But I think we can allow ourselves more warmth in our churches. There are many within our midst, who need to be reassured that God loves them. We can be the instruments of that love; we can be the gentle touch, the warm smile, the word of encouragement.

Occasionally I will venture down to "Cold Beer and Cheeseburgers." for lunch. I remember one day looking out the window and saw a dirty, disheveled old man standing in front of Prices. As I watched a saleswoman came out and kindly asked him to move on. Suddenly, without warning this dirty old man reached out and put his arms around her in an awkward, drunken embrace. As I watched I saw this

old man become a little boy; crying for his mother. I envisioned a husband missing the closeness of his wife. I saw a human being, just needing someone to love him.

If we are so distant, so antiseptic with one another; how can we be instruments of God's love here on earth.

<IV>

Christian Feet

One section of Handel's oratorio Messiah that always seemed strange to me was the section that was built on the phrase "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace." Paul uses this phrase several times in his letters.

How beautiful are the feet of those who walk the pathways of compassion and justice. The author of James would agree: for the bottom line of the listening, the believing, the affirming, the loving is a religion of the feet. Feet that move and take us to those places where there is loneliness, rejection and pain.

Pure religion is a religion of movement and action. George Buttrick, told the story of a wealthy woman in his parish who by her own admission was mean, quarrelsome and self-centered.

She confessed her wretchedness of soul to George, and he spoke the forgiving word, but he also challenged her. "Esther, I want you at the church with your chauffeur every Tuesday. I want you to find out who is in the hospital and I want you to visit them and take them flowers."

The woman did as she was directed. She did it week after week, until she became known as the "little flower lady of the hospitals."

How beautiful are the feet of those who go and do.

<V>

Christian Minds

How often have you heard a minister invite you to assume the mind of Christ, to experience people as Christ experienced them.

I'm still a great fan of Shultz's Charlie Brown comic strip. In one strip Linus and Charlie Brown are talking about life.

Linus asks "Do you know that girl's name, Charlie Brown?" pointing to a girl strolling down the street.

Charlie Brown responds: "No, but I remember her. One day last month, I offered her half of my candy bar, and she just walked away. I can't remember names, but I never forget a slight!"

That's the kind of dilemma we're in. We can't forget the slights, we can't forget the hurts. We tend to dwell on all those miserable old thoughts.

A newspaper editor told of man who was born with a withered leg. From infancy he had to wear a brace. As a boy, he couldn't run or play or climb trees with the other kids. Consequently, he began to feel sorry for himself, until there was not only a brace on his legs, but a brace on his spirit as well.

One day his father took him to a great cathedral, known for its healing powers. Together they knelt and prayed, beseeching God to heal the weathered limb. Suddenly the boy cried out: "Dad, I'm healed." The boy leaped up, his leg was still the same, but he had a different outlook about him. He said, "God hasn't taken the brace off my leg, but he has taken the brace off my mind."

God give us the grace to experience a healing of our minds that the braces that we wear may be removed, the destructive thoughts we harbor may be abolished so that we may all become the ideal Christian that you imagine us to be.